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ESSAY | William Safire

The Polygraph Lied

WHILE poking into the motivations of former national security adviser Robert (Bud) McFarlane, I tripped over a story that took place in 1982 in which The New York Times played a part. Because I was not privy to The Times's role, and because recent leads came from people outside the newspaper who share my outrage at "lie detectors," I feel free to tell it now.

On Oct. 24, 1982, the reporter Philip Taubman of The New York Times filed an exclusive story. Headline: "U.S. Aides Say British Spy Gave Soviet Key Data." Citing "American sources," Mr. Taubman wrote that the British Government had refused to report on a serious security leak by a Soviet agent, Geoffrey Arthur Prime, at the main electronic intelligence center in Cheltenham.

The Russians knew exactly what secrets Mr. Prime had been providing; the Brits knew and were concealing their embarrassment; our National Security Agency knew, too, thanks to some listening-in on the Brits. Only the public was in the dark; naturally, Mr. Reagan's national security adviser at the time, William Clark, asked the F.B.I. to investigate to find out what "American sources" enabled the public to find out the degree to which its security was imperiled.

Members of Mr. Clark's National Security Council staff were told to volunteer for polygraph tests because Administration stalwarts Caspar Weinberger, Frank Carlucci and William Casey were fervent believers in the accuracy of "lie detectors," which they consider the divining rods of truth.

One of those who were tested was Lieutenant Colonel McFarlane, who was then serving as Judge Clark's N.S.C. deputy. He failed the polygraph test.

The stunned colonel said there had to be some mistake. He was certain he was not the source of The Times's story; he asked for another test. The experienced polygraph examiner, who was aware that a loyal military officer could be ruined by the results, conducted the second test with extraordinary care.

Bud McFarlane flunked again: the examination branded him a liar and jeopardized his career.

In desperation, Colonel McFarlane called the publisher of The New York Times, Arthur O. Sulzberger, who happened also to be a former marine. Bud said nothing of the polygraph tests, but said he was sure he was not the source of Mr. Taubman's story. Could The Times corroborate that he was not the leaker?

Frank Sulzberger said he would discuss it with A.M. Rosenthal, then Ex-

ecutive Editor. The problem the journalists faced was this: Once the precedent was set for "clearing" any Government official as having not been a source, where would it end? How many guesses did the Government get? In this case, the publisher decided to back up Bud McFarlane's truthful assertion but not to respond to further questions about other suspects.

Accordingly, when the deputy to the national security adviser called back, the publisher told him, "You were not the source."

Colonel McFarlane said, "Don't tell me, tell it to this man." He then put on the President of the United States. The surprised Mr. Sulzberger then told Mr. Reagan that he was wrong to suspect this good marine; the President remarked cheerfully how he was surrounded by marines in his Administration (Baker, Shultz, Regan) and that was that.

Bud McFarlane, certified non-leaker, remained on the White House staff and was promoted a year later to na-

A 1982 appeal by McFarlane.

tional security adviser. The polygraph testers later coolly explained to the man whose career they almost terminated that it really was difficult to get reliable results about questions of leaking from officials who occasionally had to talk to the press.

Consider what this episode reveals. Bud McFarlane was in fact not the leaker; he was falsely condemned by a Kafkaesque machine whose print-out would be decisive with the President of the U.S.; his innocence had to be affirmed by a newspaper that had to decide to break its own rules guarding its ability to get the news. This also shows how an adept spy in the N.S.C. could outwit the polygraph and become the American Prime.

A few months ago, a woman was dismissed at John Poindexter's N.S.C. for refusing to take a polygraph test. A few months from now, Congressional committees will call Bud McFarlane, who seeks no immunity, and compare his version of who knew what and when with polygraph proponents like John Poindexter, Ed Meese, Donald Regan, Frank Carlucci and Caspar Weinberger.

My inclination will be to believe the man who twice flunked the lying polygraph.